

## SECOND LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION IN A BILINGUAL CHAT ROOM: GLOBAL AND LOCAL CONSIDERATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

This paper considers how global practices of English on the Internet intersect with local practices of English in the territorial or national sphere in constructing the language experiences of immigrant learners. Using a multi-contextual approach to language socialization, this paper examines the social and discursive practices in a Chinese/English bilingual chat room and how this Internet chat room provides an additional context of language socialization for two teenage Chinese immigrants in the US. Analysis of discourse, interview, and observational data reveals that a mixed-code variety of English is adopted and developed among the focal youth and their peers around the globe to construct their relationships as bilingual speakers of English and Cantonese. This language variety served to create a collective ethnic identity for these young people and allowed the girls to assume a new identity in speaking English that doesn't follow the social categories of English-speaking Americans versus Cantonese-speaking Chinese in their local American context. This paper makes the case for studying how people navigate across contexts of socialization in the locality of the nation-state and the virtual environments of the Internet to articulate new ways of using English.

### INTRODUCTION

Yet new times may require an expanded research agenda, one that focuses not just on the suppression of diasporic identities by dominant classes. Needed is one that engages with new textual configurations, one that de-reifies concepts of culture, and explores new definitions not only of discourse, but as well of language as necessarily blended, multiglossic, and transcultural. This will require that linguists and sociologists alike question the essentialist symmetries between language, culture, and nation that we continue to take for granted. (Luke, 2002, p. 108)

Sociocultural studies of language and literacy have illuminated how textual practices are acquired through socialization into different socioeconomic, gender, ethnic, and religious groups within a society (e.g., Baquedano-Lopez, 2001; Cherland, 1994; Cushman, 1998; Heath, 1983; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Street, 1993). Literacy is not a neutral medium for achieving individual cognitive growth or societal development, but is thoroughly embedded in the power structures of society and functions in different ways according to the specific ideological contexts of its use (Lemke, 1995; Luke, 1996; Street 1984, 1993). Language and literacy education, in the form of instilling "proper" reading and writing practices and canonical interpretation, is found to be historically related to the disciplining of the work force and the political and moral regulation of diverse citizenry for nation-building purposes (Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Graff, 1979, 1982; Lankshear, 1987). Recent critique of second language (L2) education has raised questions about the dominant ideology behind the linguistic norm and academic genres into which students are schooled (e.g., Benesch, 1993, 2001; Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999; McKay 1993; Pennycook, 1995). It has noted that learning a second language, especially in a context where the L2 is the language of power in society, involves a process of assimilation into the linguistic conventions and cultural practices of the L2 discourse communities. In short, language learning, be it for native or second language speakers, is an important social practice through which a society constructs and reproduces its dominant beliefs, values, and social relations.

Yet, in the contemporary period of globalization, the construction of identity and social relations is increasingly taking place amidst the trans-border circulation of cultural and discursive materials that embed forms of belonging and subject-making beyond the nation. In recent anthropological thinking, the notion of culture as an analytical concept has been problematized to take into account the destabilized relationships of people, language, space, and culture (e.g., Appadurai, 1996, 2001; Gupta & Ferguson, 1992; Hannerz, 1996). Working from a transnational perspective on cultural flows and social networks, these theorists argue that we may better understand the construction of identity and life trajectories by examining the affiliations that people make as they engage in social practices that often stretch across national boundaries. For example, Grossberg (1997, 2000) notes that, with the multiplicity of social networks and cultural groups across national borders, the global could be a *place* invested with a deep sense of personal interest and attachment. In his words (1997),

All of this entails asking what it means to be situated in particular places, what it means to belong, and what different ways (or modalities) of belonging are possible in the contemporary milieu. It is no longer a question of globality (as homelessness) and place (as the identification of the local territory and identity), but of the various ways people are attached and attached themselves (affectively) into the world. (n.p.)

For some people, the imagination has become an important site where they find their mode of cultural belonging (Appadurai, 1996). This is increasingly apparent in the uses of electronic media, for example, for the organization of virtual communities of social and political interest groups and the transnational popular culture of music, film, and fashion (Wilson & Dissanayake, 1996).

This article explores how new forms of social networking have emerged on the Internet; forms that promote particular uses of English among young immigrants who are in the process of learning English as a second language. It examines the social and discursive practices in one such networked environment, and seeks to understand how the use of English in this global context of the Internet may relate to the local context of immigrants acquiring English in the United States.

To this end, I present a case study of two young Chinese immigrants, Yu Qing and Tsu Ying,<sup>1</sup> who had turned to a bilingual Chinese/English chat room to develop their fluency in English. I examine the language practices of this virtual community and how it provides an additional context of language socialization for the two teenage girls. Whereas at school the two girls had difficulty interacting with their English-speaking peers, on the Internet they were able to use English to create social and ethnic identifications with other young people of Chinese origin in different parts of the world. It was in the chat room environment that they participated in the verbal culture of teenagers (in English) and socialized to a collective identity related to the kind of English that they were acquiring. In analyzing the exchanges in the bilingual chat room, I demonstrate and argue that a mixed-code variety of English that includes writing in romanized Cantonese was adopted and developed among the girls and their peers to construct their relationships as bilingual speakers of English and Cantonese. This language variety served to create a collective ethnic identity for these young people and specifically allowed the two girls in this study to assume a new identity through language. This new identity follows neither the social categories of English-speaking Americans nor those of Cantonese-speaking Chinese.

In the following section, I first provide a conceptual background for researching language socialization in multiple contexts and its application to understanding language practices in computer-mediated environments. I then turn to the research methodology and discussion of the case study, and end with some implications for examining English on the Internet from the perspective of intersecting socialization processes across global and local/national space.

## EXTENDING LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION RESEARCH

The theoretical framework for this study is informed by a tradition of research in language socialization that looks at how language learning is part of a process of socialization through which the learner acquires particular status and relationships in the social environment where the learning takes place. Language socialization researchers (e.g., Baquedano-Lopez, 2001; Heath, 1983; Jordan, Au, & Joesting, 1983; Phillips, 1972; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Valdez, 1996) have examined the patterns of communication between adults and children, same-age and cross-age peers, and interactions in institutional and community settings across different ethnic and socioeconomic groups, and have shown that language learning is intricately related to the construction of social roles, cultural affiliations, beliefs, values, and behavioral practices among participants in a community. Synthesizing a range of cross-cultural research, Schieffelin & Ochs (1988; also see Ochs & Schieffelin, 2001) note that the process of language acquisition and the process of socialization are integrated since language is often the medium or tool to initiate the individual into the stock of knowledge and practices of a community, and the acquisition of appropriate uses of language is part of acquiring social competence in that community.

This perspective of language socialization is reflected in Gee's (1996) concept of *discourses*, which refers to the many socially specific practices of literacy in society that include using oral and written language in tandem with other symbol systems, thinking, believing, valuing, acting, interacting, gesturing, dressing, and using tools and technology. In other words, literacy is never just reading and writing in isolation, but is part of a set of practices, that is, discourses, that enact the cultural norms of a particular social group and the identity of the individual within that group. In Gee's view, discourses are not mastered by overt instruction, given the largely implicit cultural assumptions and beliefs that operate with any specific use of literacy, but by enculturation into social practices through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the discourse.

While research on language socialization has focused on the processes of language and literacy development within specific social and cultural groups, it has tended to overlook the intersection of multiple groupings or contexts of socialization in constituting the language experiences of an individual. In other words, it is important to note that language practices do not exist in isolation from each other, just as cultures and communities do not exist as discrete entities, but rather interact with each other in various degrees of complementarity or conflict (see Rampton, Roberts, Leung, & Harris, 2002, for a similar critique). This inter-relationship can be seen in the research referenced above (e.g., Heath, 1983; Jordan, Au, & Joesting, 1983; Phillips, 1972; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Valdez, 1996) in that *majority* (predominantly middle- and upper-class white), and *minority* children are socialized to adopt different sets of language behaviors that pre-dispose them to success or failure in schooling. In other words, school literacy practices exist in closer complementarity with white middle-class language socialization practices and greater disjunction with the language and cultural norms of minority groups. This set of relationships is governed by the power structure of society that privileges those who are socialized with particular linguistic and cultural dispositions (Bourdieu, 1991), and who have developed familiarity with particular genres and discourses (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Gee, 1996), as well as ways of interacting with print (Cushman, 1998; Heath, 1983; McDermott & Varenne, 1995).

Hence, it is crucial to understand language socialization as a site of struggle where language practices are governed by and used to produce configurations of power that determine the norms of conduct, and where the diverse affiliations or socialization experiences of the learner interact with each other to influence how the learner is socially positioned in any specific language learning context. Through the case study presented in this article, I examine how the language practices and social relationships that the focal students adopted in the global context of the Internet relate to their language learning experiences in the local context of the US. Below, I discuss how the framework of language socialization outlined in this section provides an understanding of communication in online environments.

## LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

A growing body of research in computer-mediated communication has shown the emergence of social and political interest groups on the Internet and the use of language within these groups to construct communal affiliations, social and cultural beliefs, identities, and relations of power. For example, in her study of a Usenet newsgroup (rec.arts.tv.soaps) devoted to the recreational discussion of daytime soap operas, Baym (1995) reveals various forms of conventional expressions shared by members of the group. Such conventions include the codification of acronyms for the soap operas and nicknames for the soap opera characters, the expectation that newsgroup members would disclose personal details of their lives akin to the narrative devices of the soap operas, and the development of unique forms of jokes that draw attention to the hilarity and absurdity of the soap opera world.

Similarly, Tepper (1997) analyzes the use of *trolls* -- insiders' jokes and peculiar forms of spelling -- as a boundary mechanism for consolidating group culture and distinguishing insiders from outsiders in the Usenet newsgroup, alt.folklore.urban (AFU). Not only do new posters who wish to become part of the AFU culture have to learn the trolls, they are also advised to study the FAQ (frequently asked questions) file that contains a long list of legends and codified information about the group's culture. All this constitutes the process of initiation into the AFU newsgroup culture. As Tepper comments,

Posters must recognize and adhere to the group's standards, and new readers must be trained in the group's ways. Furthermore, if no one can be prevented from reading or writing to the group, there must be some way of distinguishing between these posters to the group who are actually "in" the group and those who are still "outside" it, and all this must be accomplished through asynchronous textual production, with none of the verbal or visual cues that are so crucial to traditional notions of subcultural formation. (p. 45)

Bays (1998), through an analysis of community as *frame* for interaction in an Internet Relay Chat (IRC) group, demonstrates the significance of textual production in creating group culture in electronic media. By portraying in words the imagined physical setting of their conversation and the behaviors of the participants that form the context of their social encounter, the members of the IRC group that Bays studied collectively constructed a sense of community as a notion associated with familiarity, sharing, and working together for the common good. Some such behaviors included the exchange of cookies to represent generosity and goodwill, while aberrant or aggressive behaviors such as swearing were strictly prohibited.

In a more elaborate study, Cherny (1999) adopts the "ethnography of speaking" approach to examine what participants of an object-oriented Multi-User Domain (MUD) called ElseMOO (MUD + Object Oriented) need to know to communicate appropriately in the ElseMOO speech community. Cherny argues that ElseMOO could be studied as a speech community by virtue of the interactional rituals and routines that recur regularly in this electronic environment (such as greeting, leave-taking, expression of affect, jokes, and forms of language play), the creation of new syntactic and morphological forms (mostly through abbreviation), and specific patterns of turn-taking and back-channeling in dialogic exchanges. A routine interaction is often simplified by rendering it as a command or by programming an object with commands on it. One of the most often used commands is "whuggle," which is a common form of greeting between close friends when they enter a virtual room. Cherny notes that some long-timers at ElseMOO describe a whuggle as akin to "a hug," or "a wave," or "a pat on the head," or "sorta like [a] hug crossed with .001 strawberry shortcakes" (pp. 123-124). Whuggles occur mainly during interactions as a sign of affection or support, but may also be used sarcastically on inanimate objects (e.g., "Pete whuggles politics").

Cherny points out that the social and material nature of the objects and commands on ElseMOO renders them as records of group history and culture. Yet, the power to write culture (i.e., to codify interactional routines) rests mainly on a select group of programmers called wizards who have the technical ability

and social influence to determine particular rules of conduct in ElseMOO. Hence, a status hierarchy or power structure is developed in this electronic community that is the subject of a considerable amount of gossip and contention.

From these studies and other related work (Hall, 1996; Jones 1995, 1997; Poster, 1997), we see the emergence of particular forms of linguistic and interactional patterns, genres (jokes, FAQ, narrative disclosure of self, etc.), and discourses (working together for the common good, the discourse of wizardry, etc.) as a means for creating group culture and socializing new members to group norms. While these practices tend to set the limits on how culture is represented and relationships are organized, some Web users are also forming alliances online to challenge dominant representations and effect social change.

For example, Kitalong & Kitalong (2000) chronicle how people from Palau, an island nation in the western Pacific that gained its independence from the US in 1994, construct Internet Web sites and e-mail lists to build connections among local residents and expatriate Palauans. Some of the Web sites provide channels for Palauans to exchange messages with each other in English and the Palauan vernacular, while others are created for the express purpose of representing and teaching Palauan culture, in contradistinction to the ways it was represented in colonial times, by using a variety of media such as Palauan proverbial sayings, music, and paintings. Kitalong & Kitalong argue that a "postcolonial Palauan identity" is constructed through the Internet to signify both the autonomy of the Palauan nation and its interconnection with ethnic Palauans living overseas and its surrounding island countries. Some expatriate Palauans are actively using the electronic media to express their views, galvanize support, and press for social changes in the governmental practices of Palau society.

This political dimension to social change is also evidenced in a recent study of the transnational linkages between Vietnamese Americans and Vietnamese nationals. Valverde (2002) found that Internet Web pages and listservs have emerged as important sites for the Vietnamese-American community to engage in the exchange of personal and political opinions with Vietnamese nationals. While some of these Internet groups restrict exchanges to non-politically sensitive topics, in other virtual sites, such as the Viet Nam Forum, Vietnamese-Americans are able to mobilize across the Pacific Ocean to voice their concerns and press for changes regarding labor abuses in foreign-owned companies in Vietnam and the civil and political rights of Vietnamese-Americans living in Vietnam. Valverde argues that these trans-border connections fostered through Internet communication have allowed Vietnamese-Americans to develop a transnational identity that extends beyond their ethnic identity as an immigrant group in the US. Although not specified in her work, Valverde (personal communication, June 3, 2003) notes that both Vietnamese and English are used as languages of communication in these Internet forums created by Vietnamese-Americans and Vietnamese nationals. Hence, as in the case of postcolonial Palau, English is involved in constructing the transnational identity of Vietnamese-Americans.

In short, research on the social and language practices in virtual communities has shown that language use, in the manner of linguistic forms, styles, genres, and discourses, is related to the construction of social beliefs, cultural representations, and collective identities. Some of these beliefs and practices follow closely the dominant social categories in society and can hardly be called experimental or emancipatory. However, there are also instances of oppositional discourses and social organizing emerging on the Internet, language use that serves to diversify the social terrain on which language is used and identity is developed. For US-based ESL learners who are participating through English in the social world of the Internet, the question arises as to what language practices and social relations they are developing through English, and how these practices on the Internet relate to their experiences with English in the US. A related question of particular interest to educators is how their participation in the networked environments affects their processes of English learning. I address these questions through the case study presented below.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Context

The study discussed in this article forms one of several case studies of a larger research project that investigates the nature of L2 literacy in the globalized media of Internet communication, and how new forms of social networking in these electronic media have provided alternative contexts of language development for young immigrants in the US. Understanding how a specific group of learners, identified as immigrants and ESL students in the U.S. school system, use English and other languages in the global contexts of the World Wide Web necessitates a research approach that explores the research participants' activities and experiences in multiple contexts and how these contextualized activities and experiences relate to each other. I started with locating participants in a school site in an urban area on the West Coast of the US, and proceeded to study their activities on the Internet. Using a multi-sited ethnographic approach (Green 1999; Marcus, 1995), I carried out fieldwork in both the school site where the focal youth were learning English in the American school system and the electronic social spaces on the WWW where they were networking through English and other languages with young people around the globe. In addition, I used discourse analysis to study how the participants' language practices are related to the construction of beliefs and identities within their social networks and relationships online.

From a methodological perspective, the case studies in this project make up a purposive sample that builds in variety and opportunities for intensive study (Stake, 1995, 2000). Given that this is an exploratory investigation of the new and emerging contexts of L2 literacy practices on the Internet, a contextualized study of the experiences of the focal students would serve to illuminate some aspects of the organization of online literacy practices from an insider's perspective, the students' processes of participation in these online practices, and how these practices relate to their use of English.

### Procedure

Over an eight-month period from January to August, 2001, I used participant observation, in-depth interviews, and textual documentation to gather data on Yu Qing's and Tsu Ying's computer experiences and activities, their personal backgrounds, and their schooling experiences. I visited their classrooms, "hung out" with them in the cafeteria and other places in the school, and observed them doing class assignments and chatting online in the computer lab. The computer lab became a place where I frequently sat beside the girls to observe their participation in the bilingual chat room. In addition, I gathered data from my own exploration of the technical set-up, demographics, and social dynamics of the chat room. Field notes were taken during my participant observation in both the school site and on the Internet.

I conducted eight tape-recorded interviews with the girls that lasted approximately one and a half hours each, to learn about their computer use, progress and reflection on their Internet activities, experiences at school, experiences learning English, and other relevant background information such as immigration, family, and living situation. Records of the public exchanges in the Hong Kong chat room were made through a computer program that captured the screen display of the chat room. Approximately 20 hours of chat room exchanges were recorded and used for analysis.

Besides using inductive thematic analysis to identify patterns in the field notes, interview transcripts, and chat room data, I adopted the analytical tools of interactional sociolinguistics to examine the discursive and rhetorical elements of the chat room dialogues. Developed from the pioneering work of scholars such as Goffman (e.g., 1975, 1981) and Gumperz (e.g., 1982a, 1982b), interactional sociolinguistics is an approach to discourse that seeks to uncover the cultural assumptions and social differentiation produced and reproduced in people's everyday conduct through the microanalysis of verbal interactions. Specifically, I analyzed how code-switching between English and romanized Cantonese in the chat room is used to index the social alignments and cultural assumptions of the participants in their online exchanges, and the role of code-switching in the construction of a collective ethnic identity.

## FROM THE SCHOOLHOUSE TO THE CHAT ROOM

Yu Qing and Tsu Ying are cousins who emigrated to the US with their families in 1998 from southern China. They had been in the US for close to 3 years at the time of this study and lived in separate apartments that were within a few blocks of each other in the Chinatown district of the city. Both girls arrived in this country with very minimal knowledge of English, but after 3 years, they were in transitional English classes, which was a step before mainstreaming into regular English classes. Yu Qing and Tsu Ying, an 18-year-old senior and 17-year-old junior, respectively, were doing quite well in school, getting approximately a B grade point average.

Both girls were eager to speak English better but had difficulty interacting with English speakers in the school, whether they were Chinese or other ethnicities. The girls and their immigrant peers hung out in the cafeteria at lunch time and walked home together speaking in Cantonese, which was their common dialect. Other ethnic groups also tended to socialize within their ethnic boundaries in the school grounds. For example, Yu Qing had this to say about the difficulty of talking to their English-speaking peers:

We don't know how to speak and we don't dare to speak. And even though some of them are also Chinese, they are ABC [American Born Chinese] and their educational background is different from ours. We have different feelings, so even when we get together, we feel that they're like white people or other people. So even though they have a Chinese face, we don't feel like they are Chinese. (interview, February 18, 2001)<sup>2</sup>

Tsu Ying added that they didn't talk to English-speaking Chinese because, "They laugh at you." (interview, March 6, 2001). Yu Qing further explained on this point,

You get nervous, you feel like, usually you feel like Chinese tend to laugh at you more than the others. Those people other than Chinese are more carefree, they won't go like ahhh over little things. (laughs) But if you talk to your own kind, the Chinese, you get embarrassed if you can't say something. (interview, March 6, 2001)

Hence, even if the girls wanted to improve their English, they had few opportunities to interact with their peers in English due to the *de facto* form of segregation at school between different ethnic groups, as well as the girls' sense of being marginalized by English-speakers and their families' isolation in an ethnic enclave. This sense of marginalization was most acute in their relation to English-speaking Chinese or Chinese-Americans with whom they shared ethnicity but not linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Both Yu Qing and Tsu Ying started exploring the Internet for their leisure activities, first to download music and play games, when they got their first computers in summer 2000. Later they heard some friends say it was fun to talk to people in a chat room on the Internet called the Hong Kong (HK) chat room. They didn't join the chat room at first for fear that their English wasn't good enough but soon decided to try it out as a way to make some friends and learn English. They had been participating in the chat room for close to a month at the time when I met them, and normally spent 3 hours in the chat room every day and more on the weekends. Compared to American chat rooms like Yahoo, which the girls had also briefly explored, the HK chat room provided a safer environment for learning and practicing English. For example, Yu Qing said,

I like to learn English, so I thought in this way I can improve my English and learn a few more vocabulary words. If I have to use all English there [in American chat rooms] to talk to people, and use grammar, I guess I may not make sense to them. (interview, May 6, 2001)

Compared to Chinese language chat rooms where they could also make friends, the girls preferred the HK chat room because of the broader range of English-speaking Chinese they could meet there. Tsu Ying said,



The English one is better ... cause I can learn more English ... and the kinds of friends I meet are broader. The people come from different places. In that one [Chinese language chat rooms], it's all Chinese who type in Chinese. They're all Chinese people who speak Chinese. (interview, June 6, 2001)

When I mentioned to the girls about the Chinese language chat room called Taishan chat room that some of their friends were visiting, they said they knew about it but wanted to practice more English, since they were always speaking Chinese already.

The girls pointed out that they felt more comfortable speaking English after joining the chat room. It wasn't because they were then able to speak perfect English, but they had an easier time starting and carrying on a conversation without worrying about the mistakes they made. In discussing how chatting had made them feel braver in talking to people, the girls highlighted the oral aspect of their increased sense of fluency in English and the importance of learning vernacular dialects, which they called "local languages." Yu Qing said,

I didn't dare to speak English before because my English was poor, like in pronunciation and grammar. I was afraid to say something wrong, and then people would laugh at me, and I would feel embarrassed. After talking more in the chat room, I feel like making mistakes is, well, people joke a lot there, and if I don't know a word, I would just sound it out. I use a lot of wrong words there too, so I feel maybe it's ok to say something wrong ... After you've been going to the chat room for a while, you get used to talking, and you spend more time on it and feel more open about it. Even though you may not feel as comfortable speaking in other places, you get into the habit. It's like as you become more open, you feel it's no big deal, and I can talk to you a bit more ... And outside you can't always talk like all *grammar* like you are preaching or reading a novel, you need to learn some local languages, how people speak. (interview, April 1, 2001)

When Tsu Ying indicated that, like Yu Qing, she was speaking more English at school after joining the chat room, Yu Qing chided her cousin, "even though she's still very shy, she wouldn't be shy at all in the chat room, she can talk about anything (laughs)" (interview, April, 2001).

In my fieldwork with the girls, I noticed their increased sense of comfort and confidence in English in one of our conversations in May, when I posed my observations and questions in English and they responded likewise in English for the first time. This came as a great surprise to me because they usually preferred speaking in Cantonese to me even when I code-switched between the two languages. When at the end of our conversation, I noted that they were speaking English fluently, the girls burst out laughing.

In the next section, I describe the set-up and demographics of the chat room where the girls acquired their sense of fluency in English, and discuss how they relate to the social groupings and languages in this online environment.

## THE HONG KONG CHAT ROOM

The Web site, [chat.com.hk](http://chat.com.hk), is called the "Hong Kong chat room" in English by the girls, which is a direct translation of its Chinese name. According to a chatmate<sup>3</sup> of the girls who was living in Hong Kong at the time of this study, the Web site was designed and hosted by a local resident of Hong Kong. A screen shot of the HK chat room is shown in [Figure 1](#).



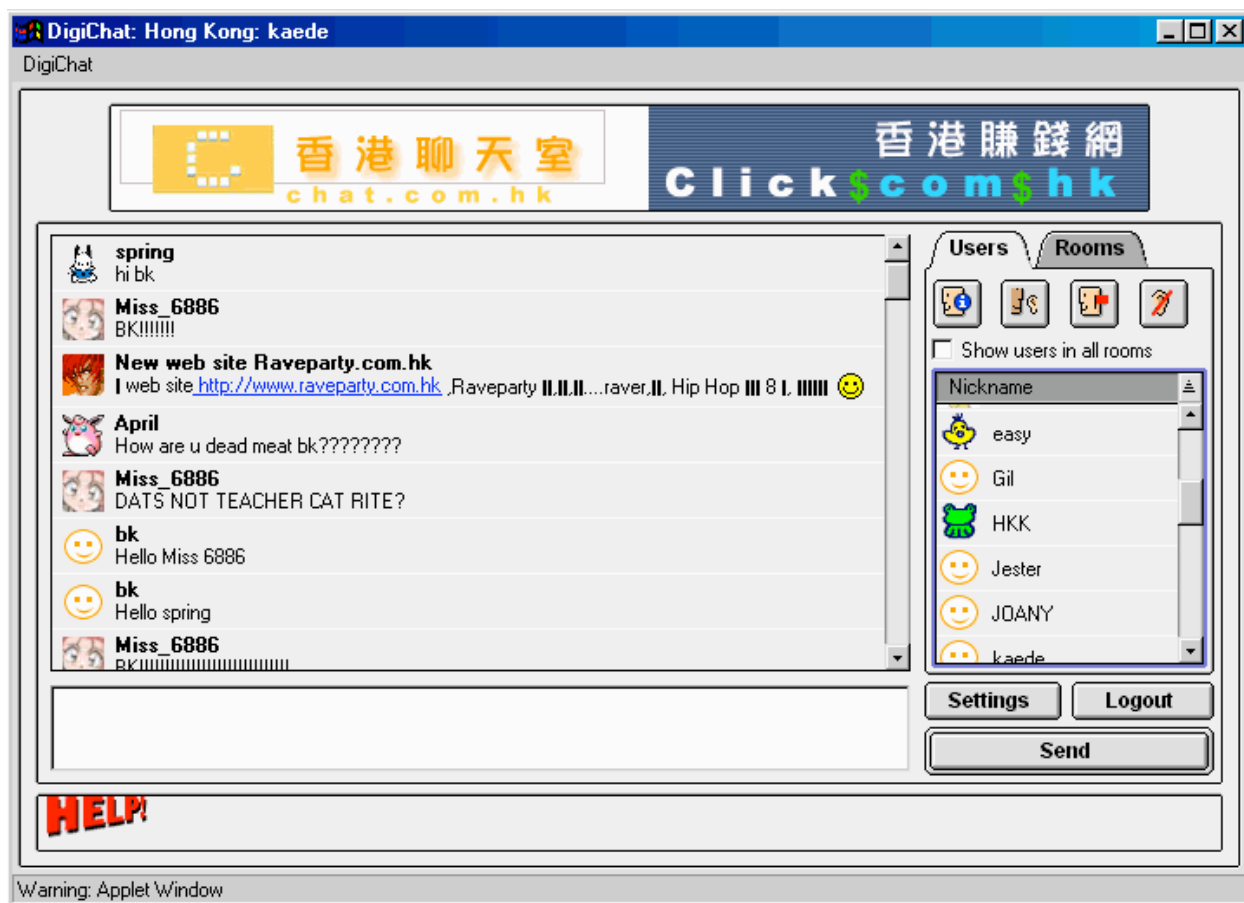


Figure 1. Screen display of the Hong Kong chat room

The labels on the user interface are shown in English, while the advertisements that appear as a banner on top and within the running screen could be in either English or Chinese or both languages. Most of these advertisements on part-time jobs, parties, and tutoring classes are geared toward the younger generation. People from various places around the world enter the chat room using Chinese or English for the most part at different times of the day and night due to time zone differences. Between 3:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. when the girls usually logged on, they could be meeting other teenagers or young adults in the US and Canada who got off school at about the same time, or people in Hong Kong or Australia who just woke up to start a new day, or people in Europe who were staying up close to or past midnight. According to the girls and some of their interlocutors in the chat room whom I interviewed online, almost every participant in the chat room was Chinese.

The girls enjoyed logging on in the late afternoon and early evening because more people wrote in English at that time and their friends were all present then. These friends of theirs were mostly Chinese emigrants in North America and Europe, together with some local Hong Kong Chinese, who opted to write in English and code-switch to different extents into Cantonese using the alphabet. The girls tended not to associate much with Hong Kong people who only wrote in Chinese characters and ethnic Chinese growing up overseas who wouldn't code-switch into Cantonese. About the friends they met in the chat room, Yu Qing said,

We're all Chinese who have emigrated to different places, so we share a common feeling when we talk. It's like when we are chatting, we feel closer to each other. Many of the Chinese in the chat room are emigrants, cause you can ask them, and some would ask you how long have you been here. Many have come here for 6, 16, or 11 years. Or like they have been in one place for

this many years, and then another place for that many years. Wow, you've been to so many places. Yes (laughs). (interview, March 6, 2001)

The variety of English that the girls and their friends used is a mixed code of English and romanized Cantonese that includes switching into more predominantly English forms at times and more romanized Cantonese forms at other times. By romanized Cantonese, I refer to the way in which Cantonese is transliterated into English sounds with the alphabet. Some examples of code-switching and romanization are shown and analyzed in the next section. This variety of English that the girls acquired in the chat room and used to construct their relationship with other Chinese young people around the world is defined against both the colloquial English adopted by many ethnic Chinese growing up in Western countries and the Cantonese language written in Chinese characters used by many HK locals.

The girls said they didn't bother to read the Chinese words in the early evening hours when they were busy talking to their friends, and oftentimes they wouldn't even turn on the Chinese software that would allow them to read Chinese characters on the computer screen.<sup>4</sup> Regarding the Western-born Chinese who wouldn't code-switch into Cantonese, the girls said these youngsters tended to get bored when they didn't understand the romanized Cantonese that the girls and their friends used, so they wouldn't talk much to each other.

The girls identified themselves as code-mixers and used different amounts of English and romanized Cantonese depending on who they were talking to and the topic of conversation. At the same instant, they could be using all English with one interlocutor and a lot of romanization with another. This became apparent to me when I was observing the girls dialoguing with multiple chatters at the same time and using more English with one and more romanization with another. But all of their friends could understand romanized Cantonese, even for those who grew up in North America or Europe. A key distinguishing characteristic of their friendship group, then, was the use and acceptance of code-switching between English and romanized Cantonese. In the next section, I discuss how Yu Qing and Tsu Ying negotiate their relationships with other chat room participants as bilingual speakers of English using different forms of code-switching into romanized Cantonese.<sup>5</sup>





















## CODE-SWITCHING AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF GROUP IDENTITY

One prominent way in which romanized Cantonese figures in the conversations of the girls and their interlocutors is through the adoption of Cantonese utterance particles at the end of a phrase or sentence. Previous studies of utterance particles in Cantonese (e.g., Kwok, 1984) and Mandarin Chinese (e.g., Li & Thompson, 1981) have identified some distinctive features of these linguistic items, which include the fact that they contain little semantic content and serve primarily to indicate the mood of an utterance and to express attitudes and emotions. While utterance particles figure massively and pervasively in conversational Cantonese, formal Cantonese writing or speech contains few of them, except for conversational or jocular styles of writing that resemble everyday speech.

In adopting a discourse perspective to analyzing the forms and functions of Cantonese utterance-final particles, Luke (1990) contends that the contribution of these particles to the meaning of an utterance is contingent on the sequential contexts of the conversation, and not on syntactic or semantic relations. In other words, how a particle affects the meaning of an utterance is dependent on what comes before and after the utterance, or the previous and anticipated lines of conversation. Hence, Luke (pp. 263-287) suggests that Cantonese utterance-final particles could be considered as *discourse markers*, following Schiffrin's (1987, p. 31) definition of discourse markers as "sequentially dependent elements that bracket units of talk." The main function of discourse markers is to provide "contextual coordinates" so that speaker meanings in ongoing discourse can be interpreted appropriately.

The centrality of particles in constituting the modality of utterances in the specific contexts of everyday conversational dialogues shows that utterance-final particles in Cantonese are a means by which speakers

can signal their awareness of and orientation to the recipient. They provide a resource in the language for conversational participants to design their utterances with particular reference to the person to whom a stretch of talk is directed. This pragmatic and social nature of Cantonese particles helps us to see how the adoption of these discourse markers in romanized form in Yu Qing's and Tsu Ying's chat room conversation could be a simple yet pervasive way in which a Cantonese conversational tone is introduced into an otherwise English dialogue. As illustration, I discuss a chat room excerpt (May 11, 2001) that shows the use of romanized Cantonese particles between *sure* (Yu Qing's nick, or nickname) and *CHoCoLaTe* (a girl in the Netherlands):

	<b>sure</b> choco.... >_< can't send mail to u ar.... next time give my your add la... can't send at your web site
	<b>spring</b> hi marlboro
	!!!!!!!!!!!!!! !!!!!!!!!!!!!! http://www.hqpetutor.com
	<b>CHoCoLaTe (*^ . ~*) LoViN` u~~~~</b> sure> how come ar? ☹️
	<b>marlboro</b> what up spring
	<b>spring</b> hihi.chocolateeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee
	<b>spring</b> just say hi marlboro
	<b>sure</b> i don't know ar.. when i click on it.. a juno web jump out
	<b>CHoCoLaTe (*^ . ~*) LoViN` u~~~~</b> hihi springgggggggggggggggggggggggggggg
	<b>marlboro</b> give me 1 min im eating
	<b>CHoCoLaTe (*^ . ~*) LoViN` u~~~~</b> huuh?
	!! D !! !!!!!! "!!"!!
	<b>spring</b> ok
	<b>CHoCoLaTe (*^ . ~*) LoViN` u~~~~</b> very strange
	<b>sure</b> choco do u know y?
	<b>armani</b> kinky stuff ?
	<b>sure</b> and i can't go your web site everytime... sometimes can't find the site
	Click on "Settings" to change name and icon. Double click a name for private !!!!!! I "Settings" ,!!!!!!/!!!2! 😊
	<b>CHoCoLaTe (*^ . ~*) LoViN` u~~~~</b> very strange ☹️
	<b>sure</b> too bad
	<b>CHoCoLaTe (*^ . ~*) LoViN` u~~~~</b> haiya
	<b>sure</b> uh?
	<b>New Web site, http://www.send.com.hk Voice mail and voice card</b> !! web site, http://www.send.com.hk send voice mail   voice card, !!! send voice mail !!!!!!
	<b>CHoCoLaTe (*^ . ~*) LoViN` u~~~~</b> u can mail me on the other emew accout ar ^^



Here, *sure* is complaining to *CHoCoLaTe* that she can't send email to her at her Web site, and sometimes can't even get on the site. *CHoCoLaTe* sounds surprised to hear this and suggests that *sure* send email to her at her other account. *sure* indicates that she doesn't have *CHoCoLaTe's* other email account and proposes that she give out her address to *CHoCoLaTe* first and then will get *CHoCoLaTe's* address when she replies. Following is an excerpt of the lines of conversation between *sure* and *CHoCoLaTe* with glosses on the Cantonese romanization (PT indicates Cantonese particles).

- |    |           |   |
|----|-----------|---|
| 1  | sure      | choco...>_< can't send mail to u <u>ar</u> (PT: neutral softener or down-toner) <sup>6</sup> .... next time give my (sic: me) your add <u>la</u> (PT: indicates request)... can't send at your web site |
| 2  | CHoCoLaTe | sure> how come <u>ar</u> (PT: indicates question)?  |
| 3  | sure      | i don't know <u>ar</u> (PT: softener).. when i click on it.. a juno web jump out  |
| 4  | CHoCoLaTe | huuh?   |
| 5  | CHoCoLaTe | very strange  |
| 6  | sure      | choco do u know y?  |
| 7  | sure      | and i can't go your web site everytime... sometimes can't find the site   |
| 8  | CHoCoLaTe | very strange (emoticon of a sad face)   |
| 9  | sure      | too bad   |
| 10 | CHoCoLaTe | <u>haiya</u> ("yes" or a sigh in Cantonese)   |
| 11 | sure      | uh?   |
| 12 | CHoCoLaTe | u can mail me on the other emew acct <u>ar</u> (PT: softener) ^^  |
| 13 | sure      | but i don't have <u>ar</u> (PT: softener)   |
| 14 | sure      | what about I give u my add. then u send a hello to me.. then I got your add or  |
| 15 | CHoCoLaTe | sure> my other account <u>ar</u> (PT: seeks confirmation)?  |
| 16 | CHoCoLaTe | oke ^^  |

In this chat extract, particles constitute most of the code-switches to romanized Cantonese, except for *CHoCoLaTe's* expression "haiya" in line 10 whose exact meaning seems not quite clear to *sure*.<sup>7</sup> Of the particles employed here, "ar" is used as a softener or down-toner, to signal a question, or to seek confirmation, while "la" indicates a suggestion or plea for a course of action. As opposed to the use of "la" in line 1 which transforms a command in English into a request through the code-switch, the adoption of "ar" in lines 1, 2, and 3, and lines 12, 13, and 15, does not exert much influence on the modality of the utterances and seems quite superfluous to their overall meanings. For example, both of the questions in line 2 "how come ar?" and line 15 "my other account ar?" do not require the particle "ar" to fulfill their status as interrogatives expressing the puzzlement of the addresser or seeking confirmation from the

addressee. However, by attaching the neutral softener "ar" to their sequential exchanges in lines 1-3, and 12-15, the interlocutors are not only incorporating a distinct and playful conversational tone in Cantonese but seem to be echoing each other in a call and response manner, and, thus, developing a tighter rapport with one another in the midst of the surrounding threads of chat room conversation.

Being discourse markers that serve to shape the modality of an utterance with specific reference to one's interlocutors in the sequential context of a conversation, Cantonese particles fulfill an important role in the code-switching practices among Yu Qing, Tsu Ying, and their peers as they construct their particular social network and distinctive way of speaking English in the chat room. These young people use romanized Cantonese particles to target interlocutors who are part of their social network, signal their orientation to them, and negotiate relationships with each other. As "tags" in discourse (Romaine, 1989) that are subject to minimal syntactic restrictions and inserted easily at the end of an English utterance without violating its syntactic rules, Cantonese particles are widely adopted by bilingual speakers in the chat room to create an emblem of Cantonese conversation in their chat dialogues and to negotiate how they relate to each other and to what is said.

In addition to the discursive function of structuring conversation and expressing modality, romanized Cantonese is also adopted for other rhetorical purposes, such as creating humor, interpersonal address, and role shifting. I discuss some of these rhetorical elements below.

According to the girls, an idiomatic saying in Cantonese is sometimes expressed with a combination of English words and romanized Cantonese to make it "more funny" (interview, May 6, 2001). Such eccentric combinations involve partly a literal translation of the Cantonese words into English and partly the use of romanization. On occasions, numerals (the popular one being "4") that are read in Cantonese and exploited for their homophony with some Cantonese words are also adopted as part of the phrasal expressions. The following are two examples:

(A.) "open laugh mei" (are you kidding; May 17, 2001)



(B) "hate 4 nei" (hate you forever; March 3, 2001)



Besides producing a humorous effect with a jumble of linguistic and numerical signs, these mixed-code expressions are used to signify the idiomatic ways of speaking in the Cantonese language and, thereby, tend to reflect how social relations are conducted in the Cantonese-speaking culture. This latter function of code-switching to introduce an alternative framework for conducting social relations is also seen in the use of a Cantonese honorific suffix for addressing one's interlocutors in the girls' chat room conversations.

In Cantonese, as in Japanese, Korean, and some other languages, an honorific suffix is attached to the name of one's addressee to signal the social relationship between the interactants. Different forms of suffixes are used to represent relative social status, age, gender, and degree of familiarity and distance. Here are some examples from the chat dialogues (*spring* is Tsu Ying's nick):

(C) "sure *che che*" (polite and familiar address for one's sister, or any young lady older than oneself; May 21, 2001). Note: the asterisks around "sek sek" (kiss kiss) denote an action; 88 is a short-hand for "bye-bye" derived from the homophony between "bye" in English and the Cantonese pronunciation of the numeral 8.



(D) "icon *jai*" (familiar or affectionate address for young boys or men; May 28, 2001)



(E) "Hong *lo*" (casual address for boys or men who appear older or eccentric; June 22, 2001). Note: "brb" is short for "be right back"; "sin" is a Cantonese particle signaling the initiation of a state or action; "*hai ar*" means yes in Cantonese.



(F) "Mark *gor*" (familiar and respectful address that is used with a male friend, relative, or acquaintance who is sometimes, but not necessarily, older than oneself; June 20, 2001)



By using Cantonese honorifics to address each other, the girls and their peers are introducing a set of cultural practices signified in the Cantonese language into the way they construct social relationships with one another, for example, in expressing politeness or affection and highlighting the gender and relative age of one's interlocutor. The honorific suffixes might also be used for other rhetorical purposes, such as adding descriptive modifier to one's addressee (e.g., eccentricity as in example E), and accentuating the gender status (as in example C where *CHoCoLaTe* might be using *che che* to avoid being mistaken for a homosexual indication in kissing *sure* goodbye, and example F where *gor* is attached to the addressee's name to emphasize the male/macho talk that is going on at the time).<sup>8</sup> Hence, Cantonese honorifics serve as a rhetorical device in code-switching both to signal an alternative system of social relational practices and for the additional semantic features that they provide.

Additionally, a code-switch to romanized Cantonese may signal a role shift or shift in the social alignments of the participants (Gumperz, 1982c; Zentella, 1997), which includes, for example, indications of group affiliation and degrees of familiarity or social distance. In the chat extract below (May 30, 2001), *LoVeLy* (alternative nick of *CHoCoLaTe*) and *DICK TRACY* (a girl in Australia) are both Chinese teenagers who were either born in or emigrated at a young age to a Western country. Here, *LoVeLy*, who seems to be more fluent in Cantonese than *DICK TRACY*, is giving a little tutoring lesson to *DICK TRACY* on the meanings of some romanized Cantonese words. Hence, when *LoVeLy* code-switches to romanization in calling *DICK TRACY* a "*kwai mui jai*" (little Western girl), she is juxtaposing the categories of Chinese and Western from the standpoint of a Cantonese speaker.



The next extract (May 30, 2001) shows *sAtAn* (a boy in Australia) and *LAMBORGHINI* (a boy in the US) chiding *spring* for feeling embarrassed when they brought up the subject of French kiss. Given that *sAtAn* doesn't use romanized Cantonese and the preceding conversation has been carried out primarily in English, *LAMBORGHINI*'s switch to romanization when telling *spring* "*ma blush lor*" (it's okay to blush) serves to indicate his insider knowledge of *spring* through the common code they share.





## DISCUSSION

In this online chat room, a mixed-code variety of English is adopted and developed among Yu Ching, Tsu Ying, and their friends to construct their relationships as bilingual speakers of English and Cantonese. It draws on the linguistic and discursive conventions of the Cantonese language to form a variety of English that distinguishes the girls and their peers from both monolingual vernacular English speakers and monolingual Cantonese speakers. This mixed-code variety that is produced on the Internet and includes different degrees of code-switching (from predominantly English to predominantly Cantonese) enables the girls to develop a sense of fluency and confidence in speaking English that has to some extent been transferred to the local American context, as evidenced in the girls' interview narratives. At the same time, this language variety serves to create a collective ethnic identity for the girls and their peers around the globe as bilingual Chinese emigrants. It is with this new identity that the girls speak English on the Internet, not as English-speaking Americans or Cantonese-speaking Chinese.

Yu Qing's and Tsu Ying's experiences in the bilingual Hong Kong chat room involve socializing to an ethnicity of being Chinese that is different from the clear distinction of Cantonese-speaking Chinese and English-speaking Chinese-American. Whereas this distinction seemed to be a choice they had to make as they learned to speak English in their local U.S. context, they were able to construct a third position with their peers in the online environment through adopting a mixed-code variety of English. This new position, in turn, has emboldened the girls' behaviors in the social context of a U.S. west coast city, where they are socially positioned as immigrant English learners. For Yu Qing and Tsu Ying, the choice to speak English in the American context is no longer simply a choice of being a Chinese emigrant or a Chinese-American according to the ethnic and language ideologies of the US. Their new identity constructed on the Internet has influenced their social positioning as ESL learners and their relation to the English language.

## CONCLUSION: ENGLISH AND LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION ACROSS NATIONAL AND GLOBAL SPACE

I have argued in presenting this case study that the two students' experiences with English in an Internet chat room can be seen as a process of language socialization through which they acquired a particular linguistic variety of English to construct ethnic identifications with other young people of Chinese descent around the world. For these students, communicating in English on the Internet involves adopting and negotiating new norms of use and developing new identities for speaking the language. I have also argued that the significance of the girls' participation in the chat room needs to be understood in relation to their experiences with English in the national context of the US. In other words, the girls' language experiences in the US affected how they approached and participated in the chat room, and their language practices in the chat room in turn influenced their relation to the English language in the USA. A Robertson (1992, pp. 100, 104) comments on cultural globalization, there is an interpenetration of the global and local in the processes of socialization: People are influenced by the global, but this is interpreted locally and local transformations are as much a part of globalization as the lateral extension of social connections across time and space.

Looking at the Internet and global English(es) through the lens of language socialization and the case study presented in this article, we need to ask the question of how global practices of English on the Internet intersect with local practices of English in the territorial or national spheres. In other words, at the same time as we engage in macro-analysis of the neocolonial and hegemonic power of English as a global language (e.g., Pennycook, 1998; Phillipson, 1992) to deconstruct the popular discourse of the spread of English as politically neutral, inevitable, and ultimately benevolent (Crystal, 1997) -- the analysis and exposure of which is of critical importance -- it also behooves us to devote attention to the ethnographic study of the ways in which English is practiced in different global media. When considered in relation to

the hegemony of English in some national contexts, the global practices of English on the Internet may offer alternative avenues for people to explore and construct their relation to the language.

What I am proposing here is that the global may not be all-consuming and invasive, just as the local viewed in terms of the nation may not always be the victim of global forces. In fact, the nation has historically been the perpetrator of global hegemony through the expansion of empire, geopolitical influence, and capitalist ideology (Chatterjee, 1986). This relativized correlation between the global and the local is especially true in situations where the global sphere may offer opportunities for opposition or resistance to the hegemonic power exerted by the nation on its subjects. This is the point argued by Valverde (2002) in her study of the transnational linkages between Vietnamese Americans and Vietnamese nationals which I discussed earlier. As a Vietnamese American herself, Valverde contends that the transnational links with Viet Nam constructed through remittances, music, and Internet virtual communities, allowed the Vietnamese-American community to contest three structural forces or what she terms "the *triple domination* paradigm":

The dominations against Vietnamese Americans include: U.S. government ideas of communism as well as push towards assimilation all the while experiencing societal rejection due to their race and class; Vietnamese government exclusion and non-recognition of its diasporic community and eventual call for *Viet Kieu* [overseas Vietnamese] involvement in the development of Viet Nam; and the vocal anti-communist groups [among *Viet Kieu*] push to repel anything coming from Viet Nam especially its communist ideology and governance. (p. 265)

By creating a virtual space on the Internet, the Vietnamese-American community and their Viet Nam counterparts are able to achieve relative freedom in expressing an array of political and personal points of view with a lesser degree of self-censorship than they would be pressured to adopt in their respective societies.

For immigrant students, the power of the nation to regulate language behaviors through the school system is shown in Olsen's (1997) study, among others, of how immigrant teenagers are socialized to conform to the language and racial ideologies of the US. Olsen documented in close ethnographic detail the dominant perception among new immigrants of Americans as exclusively English speaking, the social distance between minority students of the same ethnicity who speak English and those who don't, and the movement from nationality to "race" -- how immigrants become absorbed into particular racial categories in the U.S. society. By situating her study in the historical context of American schooling, Olsen concludes that,

There are three pieces to the process of Americanization that newcomers to the United States undergo in our high schools: academic marginalization and separation; the requirements to become English-speaking (despite many odds) and to drop one's native language in order to participate in the academic and social life of the high school; and insistent pressures to find and take one's place in the racial hierarchy of the United States. (pp. 240-241)

What do social practices of English in the global media of the Internet mean to immigrant students who are experiencing a stratified and racialized process of language socialization to becoming English-speakers in the US or any other nation as such? Might there be other avenues for them, as for the two girls in this study, to engage in practices of English that are tied to multiple linguistic expressions and the construction of alternative identities as English speakers? To answer these questions more thoroughly, we would need to analyze not only the *discourse of global English(es)* -- the ideologies and mechanisms behind the spread of English in different sociopolitical spheres including the electronic media -- but also *global English(es) as discourses* or socially specific practices that are related to group formation, identity, and socialization. By studying closely how people navigate across contexts of socialization in the locality of the nation-state and the virtual environments of the Internet, we may discover how practices of English in the global sphere articulate with local practices of English in constituting the identities and life

trajectories of people. In this way, we may see in a better light what kinds of constraints and opportunities the use of English on the Internet offers to learners of the language in its various forms.

## NOTES

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. Quotations from recorded interviews are translations from Cantonese. Italics represent the interviewee's code-switching to English.
3. I use the term "chatmate" for the chat room participants whom Yu Qing and Tsu Ying considered their friends. A related term "chatter," which I adopted from the girls, is used by them to refer to any chat room participant in general.
4. Both girls had installed Chinese software on their computers and used it to browse Chinese language Web sites and read newspapers online. Hence, their choice of not activating the Chinese software or not paying attention to Chinese characters in the chat room is additional evidence that they were disaffiliating with the group of chat room participants who wrote solely in Chinese.
5. As one reviewer of this article pointed out, the subjects' avoidance of using Chinese characters in chats could be partially due to the fact that inputting Chinese characters in chats is more troublesome, especially when the subjects were mostly in an English context within the chat environment. However, the use of romanization instead of Chinese characters further shows that the girls were adopting a convention for code-switching that is shared by ethnic Chinese around the world who comprehend oral but not written Cantonese. In this case, code-switching through romanization allowed the girls to develop a different social network than they would have by writing in Chinese characters.
6. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for calling my attention to the use of the particle "ar" as a softener or down-toner. See also Matthews & Yip (1994) and Kwok (1984) for discussion on the pervasive use of "ar" as a neutral softener in conversational Cantonese.
7. I have observed a few other instances of confusion over the romanization of homophonous Cantonese words that sound similar but look different in writing. As in regular Cantonese speech, the conversational context is crucial in determining the meaning of the romanized words in the code-switching dialogues of the chat room. Sometimes the conversational participants would have to negotiate the meaning of their romanization by paraphrasing it in English or other Cantonese words.
8. Discourses on gender and sexuality were prominent in the chat room, and were mostly carried out through the genre of adolescent flirtation. These discursive elements are analyzed in Lam (2003).

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